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Western Montana's population shows surprising trend, UM history professor says

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University of Montana--Missoula. Office of University Relations, "Western Montana's population shows surprising trend, UM history professor says" (1987). *University of Montana News Releases, 1928, 1956-present*. 10850.

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University of Montana

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MEDIA RELEASE

December 15, 1987

WESTERN MONTANA'S POPULATION SHOWS SURPRISING TREND,
UM HISTORY PROFESSOR SAYS

By Carol Susan Woodruff
UM News and Publications

Years of monitoring Montana's population has led University of Montana history Professor Harry Fritz to a startling conclusion. He says that despite the decline in its basic industries, western Montana continues to draw an increasing number of residents.

"I don't think there's a relationship between a growing economy and a growing population in this state," says Fritz, a Democratic state representative from Missoula. "People are moving to Montana not for the traditional economic reasons."

Professor Tom Power, chairman of UM's economics department, agrees with Fritz's assessment. "I think that's absolutely true," he says. "If one looks at the collapse of Montana's traditional economic base, where we've lost tens of thousands of jobs, ... we should have lost 50,000 to 100,000 people. And we didn't."

The latest Census Bureau figures show that statewide, Montana's population decreased by 7,000 between 1984 and 1986 -- from 826,000 to 819,000. "It's a little too early to interpret this drop of 7,000," Fritz says. "But my guess is it's kind of a

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Fritz.rl -- 2

blip in what has been for the last almost 20 years a steadily rising population."

That steady increase has come mainly in western Montana. Fritz says that for about the past 17 years, eight counties in Western Montana have grown faster than any others in the state: Ravalli, Flathead, Lake, Missoula, Gallatin, Broadwater, Jefferson, and Lewis and Clark.

"It's precisely in those counties where there aren't any jobs," he says, "where the wood products industry has cut back, mining has virtually disappeared, and there are no new boom sectors of the economy that are picking up the economic slack."

Fritz has studied census figures dating at least to 1940 and has made county-by-county comparisons using the 1960s as his reference point. Although the figures show population growth in some western Montana counties, they don't explain who's moving there.

"Suppositions include retirees, small businessmen, students, granolas, survivalists," Fritz writes in a paper called "Montana, 1965-2005: Past, Present, and Future." "Older people have increased their numbers, but surprisingly, for the first time in the modern era, the fastest-growing cohort -- a whopping 87,324 individuals between 1970 and 1980 -- consists of young adults age 20 to 39."

One indication that retirees may make up a significant part of western Montana's growing population is the dramatic increase

Fritz.rl -- 3

in the state's "transfer" (non-labor) income in the early 1980s. That increase was detected by Professor Power.

Transfer income includes Social Security payments and other retirement benefits, as well as profits from bonds and other investments. Power found that in 1986, transfer funds accounted for \$3 out of every \$8 in personal income in Montana.

Just as census figures don't clarify who's moving to Montana, neither do they show why people come here. Fritz suggests scenic beauty, a low crime rate, and educational and recreational opportunities. Another likely reason is the residential privacy Montana's wide-open spaces afford. He dismisses the state's low individual taxes as a motive.

Fritz says that to promote economic growth in the Treasure State, Montanans must analyze the reasons people have moved here during the past 15 years. Counting on traditional resource-based industries to rebound may not be enough, he says.

He disagrees with people who think that Montana's traditional industries would recover if they were less burdened by taxes, bureaucratic regulations and environmental restrictions.

"Copper mines have closed all over the American West," Fritz says. "Butte is not some singular, unique, Montana example of something we can turn around. I think you need a realization on the part of the state officials that they're going to have to try something else besides rejuvenating mining and logging."

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Fritz.rl -- 4

Fritz offers plenty of suggestions for what that something else might include. For example, he advocates building Montana's image as a good place to retire.

He's also a staunch supporter of developing Montana's travel and recreation industry. "I think basically what we've done is sit back and let Yellowstone Park and Glacier Park and maybe the Custer Battlefield -- which are all federal installations, and one of them's in Wyoming -- do all our advertising for us," he says.

Fritz believes the state should use money from its new bed tax to promote typical Montana activities available to visitors.

"I think we've got to start emphasizing things that people can do that are not destination points where they come and see some major, world-class attraction," he says. He recommends advertising pursuits like floating, hiking, cross-country running, and visiting forts, rodeos and county fairs.

Bed-tax money must go toward travel development as well as promotion, Fritz says. Development would include installing visitor information centers at main portals to the state and clearly marking and maintaining museums and forts and other historical sites.

His other suggestions for bolstering Montana's economy include promoting the outfitting industry, adding a major ski area or two, encouraging small businesses, and widely advertising schools like UM.

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Fritz.rl -- 5

"We've got a good educational system, which I think with minimum effort could attract out-of-state students into Montana," he says. "There are things you can get here that you can't find elsewhere."

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